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AUTHOR Quinn, John M.
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ABSTRACT

The Nation's 1973 child nutrition agenda has five items. (1) Of first concern must be the fulfillment of America's pledge to feed a free or reduced price lunch to every hungry child. A serious assault is required on the problem of facilities: some 18,000, or about 17 percent, of the Nation's schools lack lunchroom and kitchen equipment. (2) The nutritional adequacy of the food provided by the lunch program must be evaluated. With local school officials far more vulnerable to the pressure of both the vending machine industry and the children, there is a tremendous likelihood that the next year will witness a boom in competitive non-nutritional foods in the school lunchroom. (3) The universal school lunch concept ought to be fully aired. Senator McGovern has proposed a pilot program to run for two years at a cost of 15 million dollars. The principal issue that needs to be resolved before we can jump head-long into a nationwide program is simply this: with pressing social needs of many kinds facing the Nation, are the benefits that might accrue from such a program worth the cost? (4) The school breakfast program should be rapidly expanded. (5) The field of nutrition education should be explored. From the medical schools of the Nation on down to our kindergartens, there is a shocking absence of nutrition education programs. (Author/JM)

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School Feeding -- Where Do We Go From Here? An Agenda for 1973

John M. Quinn, Professional Staff Member, U.S. Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs

It has been just about five years since the late Robert Kennedy knelt to touch a child sick from hunger in a dirt yard in Mississippi. Since that time we have flattered America's hungry -- especially her hungry children -- with massive publicity, Congressional Committee hearings, a White House Conference on Food, Nutrition and Health, a Poor People's Campaign and on and on. Yet, after five long and, frequently, frustrating years, as many as four million children who indisputably suffer from undernutrition and malnutrition, from hunger and all the social, educational, economic and health consequences that follow, still go without food assistance in the schools of our Nation. It is in this very real sense that one can trace much of the failure (even defined as too little victory too late) of our so-called War on Poverty. In 1964, we declared "unconditional war on poverty in America," and launched an effort to educate, clothe, train, employ, house, provide legal services, health care and family planning for some 39 million poor Americans. Ignored or undiscovered, depending on your perspective, was the existence of widespread hunger and malnutrition. This reality was left out of the battle plan in the first great war of the decade for at least five years. We failed to realize at the time that, while we may argue over the extent to which ending hunger will help to eliminate poverty, we can be sure that so long as we fail to do battle against hunger we shall never win a war against poverty. Perhaps the most important effort of the United States Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs in its first year of operation was to educate the American people to this one fact of life as it applied to hungry children. It became capsulized in this oft-quoted message: A hungry child cannot learn.

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I do not want to seem to be saying that progress has not been made in the last several years in our efforts to end childhood hunger in America. But, as President Richard Nixon said just three years ago, something like the very honor of American democracy is at stake -- the goal is to end hunger. That has not occurred. Apparently, the wrong war has been ended. True, we have raised the number of children receiving a free or reduced price lunch from under three million per day to about 7.6 million per day -- but, somewhere between 10 and 12 million children need such a meal, for it may not only be the only nutritious meal they receive, it may be the only meal, period. And, unfortunately, there is high likelihood that among the children whome we have failed to reach are many of the poorest of the poor.

True, we have dramatically increased the numbers of dollars available in the federal budget for child nutrition efforts -- money spent on free and reduced price lunches has increased twelve-fold in the last four years, and overall, we are spending more than 1.4 billion in the general area of child nutrition. Yet, a team of doctors in Denver, after documenting the fact that malnutrition as it is found among children in the United States today can lead to irreperable mental and physical damage, diagnosed within the last year numberable cases of kwashiokor and marasmus. These are the most serious forms of malnutrition, previously thought to exist only in the developing world. A draft report of the National Nutrition Survey, released last year, documented 18 cases of rickets, also thought to no longer exist in the United States.

The real issue before us is where do we stand in the struggle to bring justice to the hungry child. To talk about progress now is, in my mind, like claiming victory just for staying in the game. For as long as the hungry ghetto child is denied a lunch that might be his only meal of the day, as long as rural and migrant poor children may suffer irreperable nutrition related mental retardation, then I say we have failed in our single most important domestic undertaking.

Where, then, do we go from here?

Of first concern must be the fulfillment of America's pledge to feed a free or reduced price lunch to every hungry child. In 1970, Congress passed amendments to the National School Lunch Act, sponsored by Senator George McGovern, that had as their most important attribute a federally guaranteed right to a noontime meal for needy children. For the first time, Congress and the President flatly stated that every needy child "shall receive" a free or reduced price meal. To make that promise a reality will require several further legislative steps. We need to increase the federal appropriations so that the dollars are there to back up the pledge. To do this we must first maintain an adequate federal minimum reimbursement rate for each meal, whether it be free, reduced price, or full price. Presently, Congress is considering reimbursement rates of 8 cents per meal for all lunches (general assistance) and 40 cents per meal for free or reduced price meals. More important than the specific rates -- as these seem to be adequate for the 1972-73 school year -- is the constant vilgilance we must keep over

the word "minimum" presently in the law. The United States Department of Agriculture, in my opinion under pressure for the Office of Management and Budget, has on two occasions during the last year sought to replace that word with another -- the vague and dangerous word "average." The first attempt to do this was through the issuance of regulations. After receipt of a letter of protest from nearly half of the United States Senate and after considerable bad publicity, USDA receeded. Several months later, though, the same object was attempted legislatively. This, too, was rejected. But, why all the concern? Simply because under the present law every needy child's lunch would be reimbursed by the federal government to the level of at least 40 cents. Additionally, the state school lunch authority may go as high as 60 cents per lunch in areas of high poverty concentration. If the requirement were only that USDA reimburse at an average of 40 cents, the high poverty concentration allowance would become meaningless -- for every meal reimbursed at 60 cents USDA would be able to reimburse another meal at 20 cents to average 40 cents. When one considers that we are speaking only of <u>poor</u> children's meals, and if one doesn't really think that a poor child in the "not-so-inner" city is less hungry than one in the inner city, then it becomes clear that the averaging mechanism desired by the USDA is a shoddy dollar saving device that would result in robbing a poor Peter to feed a poor Paul.

As for an adequate appropriation, special assistance will require a level of approximately $790 million per year to assure that 11 million children are fed each day. (This figure takes into account an absentee factor.)

A $250 million increase over this year's spending will be required to reach this level. Similarly, the general assistance appropriation will have to be raised commensurately -- by about $50 million.

A prerequisite to these steps will be a serious assault on the problem of facilities in our nation's schools. As stated earlier, there is a high likelihood that the children whom we are missing are the poorest of the poor. This is true because, at this point in the development of child nutrition programs, the single largest obstacle to reaching our goal is the lack of lunchroom and kitchen equipment in some 18,000 or about 17 percent, of our Nation's schools. Most frequently, the schools that lack facilities are not the newer suburban schools, but are the older urban elementary schools and their highly rural counterparts, both of which can normally be expected to have higher than average concentrations of poverty and near-poverty. Congress recently took steps to deal with this problem. Over the last three years the Administration has requested approximately half of the funds that were originally authorized by the Congress for this purpose. Congress, in turn, went along with the Administrations requests, the only serious challenge being an amendment by Senator McGovern in 1971 to raise the appropriation to the full authorization level. Although, the measure passed the Senate by a 2-to-1 margin, it was rejected by the Conference Committee of the Senate and the House. Fortunately, Congress just last week raised the authorization from $15 million to $40 million for the next three years--but only half of this is required to be used for schools without programs. The rest might be used for modernization of existing facilities. Modernization is a desirable objective, but it should not cut into the gearing up of

completely new programs. In the last three years, well over 50 million dollars has been spent on equipment purchases by the states and only about 5 thousand schools have been brought into the program as a result. In the coming year, we need to push for an emergency facilities construction act that would authorize as much as $150 million for schools without programs. Additionally, Congress recently eliminated the 25% matching requirement for facilities where especially "needy" schools are concerned. As far as I know, there are not more than a handful of schools or school districts that are not now "needy." One notes that 60% of the nonpublic schools in America are without lunch programs, most of them for this very reason. We need not dwell on the financial state of those institutions. How many of them, or how many public school districts, can afford to pay 25% of the cost of building kitchen and lunchroom facilities? The emergency act I recommended should at the same time either eliminate completely, or dramatically reduce the matching requirement for all schools.

There are several other relatively minor steps that the Congress and the Administration might take to move with greater expediency on the "1970 pledge." In calculating the cost of the lunch to determine the reimbursement rate, the costs of handling, preparation and serving of the food, as well as the cost of supervision ought to be included. They are not now. Many school lunch directors simply fall short of funds and are inhibited from attempts at further expansion to more needy children because of rapidly increasing labor costs. The end result, of course, is to deny needy children food.

The state matching requirement -- presently 3 state dollars to every federal dollar -- ought to be eliminated. At the same time the requirement that state government revenues constitute a percentage of funds used for the program -- presently 4% and rising to 10% by 1979 -- ought to be retained. The first matching requirement is met not by state revenues but by children's payments, and this, in turn, encourages states to charge needy children a reduced price when they ought to get a free meal, or to charge them full price when they ought to get a reduced price meal. Again, the result is to force children out of the program. Only the state revenues match is really significant to the spirit of federal-state cooperation that has been the hallmark of school lunch legislation.

Where all of the financial aspects have been addressed and one finds a school district that adamently opposes introduction of a lunchroom in its schools, the Congress might consider a requirement that in schools with enrollments over a certain number a program is mandatory in order for the state to receive a federal reimbursement. Distasteful as this might be to some, this is one way we can effectively implement the absolute guarantee of a free or reduced price meal for <u>every</u> needy child as now required by the law. If such a measure is adopted by the Congress, then the discussion above regarding the elimination of the 25% facilities matching requirement would realistically need to be applied across the board to all schools and eliminated completely rather than merely reduced.

In lieu of this measure, the Congress might also consider authorizing public or private nonprofit agencies to run lunch programs if the school

refuses to do so by a certain date. The state of California has successfully experimented with programs of this sort. And, while the concept has merit itself, we might also expect it to provide an additional incentive to the schools to institute programs of their own.

The second major item of concern for 1973 must be an evaluation of the nutritional adequacy of the food provided by the lunch program. Presently, the lunches must be "Type A" meals. But the standard promulgated under that statutory provision is not one that is tied to the Recommended Dietary Allowances promulgated by the Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences. Additionally, in the child nutrition legislation recently passed by the Congress, the provisions of the National School Lunch relating to competitive food service -- that is, the classic lunchroom vending machines -- have been deleted from the statute. Not only is competitive food service no longer regulated by the Secretary of Agriculture as to nutritional requirements, but the present requirement that profits be used in the Lunch Program itself has been rescinded. Thus, with local school officials far more vulnerable to the pressure of both the vending machine industry and its clientele, the children, there is a tremendous likelihood that the next year will witness a boom in competitive non-nutritional foods in the school lunchroom. The time is thus over-ripe for a discussion of the nutritional value of the foods served in our Nation's schools.

The third major item of discussion under the heading of school lunch concerns ought to be a full airing of the universal school lunch concept. Legislation to establish a universal lunch program, one that feeds all children at no cost, has been introduced in the Congress by Senator Humphrey

and by Representative Perkins. Senator McGovern has introduced a bill to establish a modest pilot program to study "the feasibility of such a program, to identify and seek solutions to problems of establishing and operating such a program, to evaluate the nutritional, educational, health, social and other benefits of such a program and to determine the probable cost of such a program..." I believe the McGovern approach is a more reasonable and realistic one than that which calls for immediate implementation of a universal program. Critics contend that the Humphrey Bill will cost over 5 billion dollars. Senator Humphrey himeself has estimated the cost at $4 billion, of which 3.2 billion would be provided from the federal government. The McGovern pilot program will be run for two years at a cost of $15 million. The principal issue that needs to be resolved before we can jump head long into this program is simply this: with pressing social needs of many kinds facing the Nation, many of them addressed to the problem of poverty, are the benefits that might accrue from such a program worth the cost ? We know that adequate income no longer guarantees proper nutrition. We know that proper nutrition contributes in some degree to learning ability to one's attitude and discipline, to attendance and drop-out rates and so on. We know that the absence of food makes learning and growth impossible--but we are no longer talking about the poor alone. We know, on the other hand, that overt discrimination and identification of the poor child is next to inevitable under the means test lunch program that we now have. We have not as yet attained accurate knowledge on the relationship between middle-class nutrition and health, although preliminary evidence indicates that nutrition acts as a preventive medicine of high importance. Those presently opposes to the universal concept base their arguments primarily on this lack of

cost-benefit knowledge, as well as on the fundamental philosophical belief that the role of feeding should not be taken by the state and away from the family.

Generally speaking, I think the universal lunch concept is the future of child feeding. I believe that a pilot program study will demonstrate that its worth has been greatly underestimated. At the same time, there are legitimate issues to be raised in opposition to immediate enactment of legislation to institute such a program. Thus, we should start a pilot program, begin an evaluation and get down to the debate in the coming year.

The fourth item on the child nutrition agenda should be the rapid expansion of the school breakfast program. We are slowly coming to realize the vital importance of breakfast to the child. Indeed, if we accept the notion that lunch makes the child more attentive and more willing to learn, why throw away the entire morning part of the daily educational experience. A nutritious morning meal is as essential to energy capacity, learning ability and attitude and attention span as is the noon meal to the remainder of the day. Congress has taken the breakfast program out of the pilot category and made it a full time member of the anti-hunger arsenal. A survey of the state directors of child nutrition programs indicates that approximately 20 percent of the Nation's schools would like to institute breakfast programs. They now may do so simply by having their state make the appropriate request to the USDA. Fundamental, of course, is a sufficient appropriation for this

purpose. An open-ended authorization out to be provided for the breakfast program, and if the appropriation proves to be inadequate as the schools apply for the program, then Congress out to provide supplemental funds Section 32 (of the Agricultural Act of 1935) which need not go through the long process of appropriations. Particularly in areas of high poverty concentration should immediate implementation of the programs be allowed. And, for the sake of administrative convenience there ought to be just one application process for the free and reduced categories of both programs.

The final, but certainly not the least important, item on the child nutrition agenda ought to be the exploration of the field of nutrition education. From the medical schools of the Nation on down to our kindergartens there is a shocking absence of nutrition education programs. The lunch and breakfast programs themselves should be an educational experience. This is why I am disturbed by the way the Congress went overboard on the competitive food issue that I referred to earlier. Additionally, we need to provide incentives to teach nutrition education in the elementary and secondary schools, in the teacher's colleges and the schools of medicine. It seems that every time we talk about any nutrition issue, whether it be school lunch or food stamps or even welfare reform, we reiterate our concern that at some point we must reinforce our efforts with sound nutrition education programs.

In this regard, we are not faced with the same sort of objections that are presented to matters like the universal lunch program. Although, many would find it easier to perpetrate the "booze and baby food" myth about the

poor than to tackle the problems of poverty themselves, the fact of the matter is that nutritional ignorance is distributed evenly among the poor and the non-poor. It is here that we can most assuredly say that adequate income does not guarantee an adequate diet. In point of fact, an unreported USDA study four years ago conclusively demonstrated that the poor get more of every important nutrient per food dollar spent than the non-poor--they also spend less on and consume less potato chips and liquor than do their more wealthy counterparts. Nutrition, whether it relate to obesity or hunger, heart disease or social division, is a problem for all of the American people. As Dr. Margaret Mead said when she opened the investigations of the Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs, "we need to face the simple facts: The American people are less well nourished, as a whole, than they were 10 years ago." That is still an accurate statement. The concept of nutrition education might serve as a useful vehicle for the establishment of a "national nutrition policy," a comprehensive approach to raising the level of nutritional quality in America, reducing nutrition-related disease (this is one area where nutrition education might take the form of far more intensive academic research into the relationship between diseases such as arteriosclerosis or cancer and nutrition.) and, of first priority, the elimination of poverty related hunger.

This agenda covers only those fields that are largely dependent upon the school as the delivery system. I have not addressed myself to matters such as family food programs, food programs for the elderly, nutritional adequacy and the reform of welfare, or even the programs aimed at reaching the most vulnerable of the hungry, the infant and pregnant or lactating

mother. Many of the recommendations I have outlined have already been put into legislative form by members of the Select Committee. See, for example, S.3537, sponsored by Senators Hart, McGovern, Case and Cranston. The universal pilot bill introduced by Senator McGovern is S.3263.

It is hoped that this paper will provide, not firm solutions to the child nutrition problems that we still face, but rather a starting point of thought and debate so that we might be quickly about our business of "safequarding the health and well-being of our Nation's children."*

*The expressed intention of the National School Lunch Act of 1946